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In memoriam

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Box 283

In Memoriam



Victoria

In Memoriam

VICTORIA, THE WOMAN

SERMON

PREACHED AT THE MEMORIAL SERVICE
OF HER MAJESTY
QUEEN VICTORIA

AT

THE COLLEGIATE CHURCH
FIFTH AVENUE AND 48TH STREET

BY

REV. DONALD SAGE MACKAY, D.D.
MINISTER OF THE CHURCH

JANUARY 27TH, 1901

PRINTED BY REQUEST OF THE CONSISTORY AND CONGREGATION

July 1, 1930 DA 1152

VICTORIA, THE WOMAN.

Text: A woman that feareth the Lord, she shall be praised. Give her of the fruit of her hands, and let her own works praise her in the gates. Proverbs xxxi.: 30, 31.

ALTHOUGH citizens of a republic, we are not barred to-day from the expression of our sympathy with our kinsmen across the sea in this hour of their national sorrow. Moreover, as the oldest church in the city of New York, holding our charter directly from the British Crown of a date earlier even than that of the charter of Trinity Parish, there is a further reason why we should add our tribute of respect to the memory of Britain's greatest Queen. It is indeed a universal sorrow, without distinction of creed or nationality, which touches the great heart of the world to-day. Never in human history has the death of a woman struck a note of sympathy so deep, or touched a chord of sorrow so universal, as the death of Queen Victoria. The civilized world becomes a great democracy as it stands in common sympathy beside her bier. Peoples and kings, princes and peasants, rich and poor, the humble and the great, are united in the bonds of a common humanity as they mourn the death of one of God's true women.

It is from this standpoint, the standpoint of Victoria the woman, wife and mother, rather than

that of Victoria, empress and queen, that I am to speak this morning of some of the outstanding features in her life and character. I wish to point some simple, practical lessons which this long life, lived in the blaze of publicity for sixty-four years, suggests to every thoughtful and sympathetic mind. It was the dignity of her womanhood more than the dignity of her position that made the name of the Queen a title of respect wherever it was spoken. It was the womanliness of the queen that made possible the queenliness of the woman. It was in the empire of the home more than in the empire of the state that her truest claim upon the enduring devotion of her people must rest. In that "fierce light which beats upon a throne," she held sacred and inviolate throughout these years the citadel of a woman's purity, and it was her woman's heart, sharing the sorrows not only of her own people but of other peoples as well, that sways the suffrage of the world's respect.

Yet even as queen, what a contrast there was between the life of Queen Victoria in its calm serenity, and the lives of other queens whose names are written in history and whose lives were as litanies of sorrow to which the anguished hearts could only cry, "God be merciful!" How many of the world's queens have lived lives in which tragedy and woe were the dominant notes! Take for example Queen Eleanor of England, and you remember with what savage sarcasm, born of her sorrows, she described herself, "Eleanor, by the wrath of God Queen of England." Or is there anything more pitiful than the autograph of poor Margaret of Anjou, written on a slip of paper with trembling lines, "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity."

And Mary Tudor, another queen of England, felt the torture of her life so acutely that when death approached she beseeched her attendants that no pageantry of royalty should attend her funeral and that no crown should rest on her bier. "Let me sleep as a woman," she said. Or think of the tragic story of Mary Queen of Scots, and how she cried out on the morning of her execution, "The Scottish crown has brought me nothing but sorrow!" Even Elizabeth, in the zenith of her power, exclaimed, out of the bitterness of disappointed ambition, "I am weary of my life." Contrast these utterances of British queens—not to mention the tragic story of the queens of France and Spain—with that of Victoria, and how impressive is the serenity which marked her life, longer far than any of theirs, until its close, at sundown on Tuesday last.

If we put this contrast between the life of Victoria and the lives of other rulers during her own reign, the record is even more startling. Since the young Queen ascended the throne in 1837, one emperor of Russia has been assassinated, one sultan of Turkey has been assassinated, one king of Italy has been assassinated, one empress of Austria has been assassinated, two presidents of the United States have been assassinated, one president of France has been assassinated, one emperor of Mexico was shot, one king of Bavaria committed suicide, and one crown prince of Austria, heir-apparent to the throne, also committed suicide. What a record of bloodshed during one reign! It almost defies belief that in the quiet days of the nineteenth century just closed, during the life of one ruler, such things could have occurred. Think, too, of the thrones in the same

period that were abandoned by their rulers before the fury or revolt of their subjects. One queen of Spain was deposed, one king of Spain abdicated, one king of France was driven from his throne, another emperor of France fled from his throne, one king of Italy abdicated, one king of Servia abdicated, one king of Bavaria abdicated.* Yet in the midst of all this shock of change and turmoil of events, this life of eighty-two years finished its course in the security that came from the love and devotion of the people she served rather than ruled.

The progress of these sixty-four years of Victoria's reign, especially in the growth of the Anglo-Saxon race, marks an epoch of marvellous significance. What will be known in history as the Victorian Age, will be remembered as the period when British and American influence became dominant factors in modern civilization. During that period the territory of the United States expanded from less than a million square miles to nearly four million square miles, largely within its own borders and almost entirely by the natural expansion of its own population. The British Empire, including its colonial possessions, in the same time grew from two million square miles to twelve million square miles. The population of these two countries, in the same period, has also marvellously increased. Here in America we have grown since 1837 from something less than eight million inhabitants to nearly ninety millions; while the population of the British Empire, including its colonies, in the same time has expanded from one hundred and thirty millions to nearly four hundred

* Compare Dean Farrar's Address before the House of Commons, June 20, 1897.

millions, of whom fifty-three millions are white. The growth of the Anglo-Saxon tongue during Queen Victoria's reign, is another fact of progress whose significance is even more impressive. In 1837 the English language was one of the minor tongues in the world, being spoken by about thirty millions of people. Now it is the daily speech of nearly one hundred and forty millions, and very suggestive is the fact that the larger proportion of those who speak the Anglo-Saxon tongue to-day own their allegiance to the American flag.*

Of the deeper forces of progress beneath the pageantry of these years I cannot speak at this time. It is sufficient to remember that in the realms of literature and science, in the unveiling of Nature's secrets to man's necessities, in the devotion of saintly lives upon the altar of social service, the Victorian Age has written an imperishable record on the pages of later civilization.

These facts of progress are significant in this way: they mark the growth of one race and one tongue during the public life of one ruler. It is such a record that helps us to realize perhaps more than anything else the astounding progress of the Anglo-Saxon people during the sixty-four years of Queen Victoria's reign. What is the lesson of it all? Not, surely, to plume ourselves with a miserable self-conceit. An overweening sense of his own importance is, indeed, the cardinal fault in the Anglo-Saxon character. Some people seem to think that patriotism consists in talking about one's own country in superlatives. One may admire the enthusiasm, as one certainly does deplore the vulgarity, of the man who on

* These figures are given approximately. In the hurry of preparation exact data were not at hand.

every public occasion speaks of his own nation as "the greatest on the face of the earth," be it Britain or America, and his own city as "the biggest municipality in that greatest country on the face of the earth." I wish indeed that word *biggest* could be blotted out of the vocabulary of modern speech. It is a vulgar word. This self-conscious conceit in the Anglo-Saxon type, more than anything else, militates against that self-control and stability of character which the progress of these years should bring to every thoughtful American and British citizen.

It is infinitely better for us to-day, as we review this life that has been of such influence in these years of progress, to impress upon our own hearts as well as the hearts of our children these fundamental lessons which I now proceed to emphasize, as represented in the character of Queen Victoria.

1. Turning to the story of her personal life, I ask you to notice as the first lesson from her career the inestimable value of *parental training*. Victoria, like so many other prominent figures in history, had the priceless blessing of a good mother. Over her long reign rests the shadow of a mother's influence like a benediction; and a mother's influence is surely the dearest and most potent under heaven. It follows us wherever we may go. It abides with us to the close. When the shadows of death gather over us, the memory of a mother's prayers is like the day-star's radiance across the sky of departing night.

It was so with the young Queen. The Duchess of Kent, who early recognized the destiny of her child, with rare judgment and self-control devoted every energy, under the guidance of God, to the training of the young girl for her high position.

All false and foolish notions of her dignity in contrast with that of other children were carefully guarded against during the early years of girlhood. Not indeed until she was thirteen years of age was she allowed to have the least idea of the position to which in the providence of God she was to be called. In the simplest way, under conditions of the strictest character, with the constant supervision of a Christian mother, the child grew up to girlhood and womanhood. The training of that mother became under God a controlling influence in Queen Victoria's career.

The lesson is one which cannot be too earnestly emphasized in these days. How many children in our modern cities, born into wealth and luxury, are being trained by foolish parents with the falsest notions of life, and without a single capacity for meeting the responsibilities which wealth will by and by create! It is this indifference of so many parents to their parental responsibilities, this unwillingness of fathers and mothers to guard the minds of their children against vulgar notions of wealth and luxury, that is one of the saddest features in our time. No influence in later years can atone for the loss of a Christian parenthood in youth. A father who is ashamed to kneel in prayer with his children, or a mother who, heedless of her children's needs, surrenders to other hands their training and discipline, is in either case contributing to those forces of decay that are the destruction of a Christian people. As we stand by the bier of this woman, who was herself the best of mothers because she was the child of one of the best of mothers, let the lesson come home to every parent here to realize more earnestly the personal duty a father and a mother owe to God

to train their children in habits of simplicity and thrift, and, above all else, in reverence to God.

2. Another impression which one takes from the Queen's character is the supreme value of a high ideal in life. Nothing is sadder in the history of kings and queens than to notice how many of them entered into positions of vast power, apparently without a single ideal to guide or inspire them. It would seem as if to the majority of rulers their position was simply used for personal ambition, and degraded in the pursuit of sordid passion and pleasure. It was not so with the young woman who in her eighteenth year, in 1837, undertook the vast responsibilities which came to her. We are familiar with that sudden midnight summons, when the Archbishop of Canterbury and Lord Melbourne and others, representing the government, came knocking at the doors of Kensington Palace to rouse the young Queen with the news that the king was dead. It is a beautiful picture of the girl coming down in simple dignity, and there in the dim light accepting with unconcealed emotion the trust that was placed in her hands. The announcement, to quote her own words, thus suddenly made, was "so fraught with blessings or calamity" that the first words she could utter were, "I ask your prayers on my behalf." In the silence of that eventful night, God's minister and the young Queen knelt down together in prayer for a blessing on her reign; and these sixty-four years are vocal with the answers to that prayer. The next day her mother said to her, "Are you not afraid of the great charge which you assume to-day?" "No," she replied, "because my intentions are pure, and I know I love truth and justice." It was that high ideal, from the

outset of her career, which shaped her policy and widened her influence.

Man's ideals are God's realities, and no life, however humble it may be, which shapes itself to a high ideal, can ever be lived in vain. Our ideals are the products of our visions, and the wider our vision, the higher our ideal will be. When a young man enters business, or a young woman enters society, under the inspiration of a pure ideal, then business and society are to that extent strengthened and enriched. Yet it is the absence of such heaven-touched ideals that creates the sordidness and vulgarity in so much of our social life to-day. It is as a testimony to the controlling power of a high ideal touched with the breath of God, from the very outset of active life, that I ask you to learn the second lesson from the life of Queen Victoria.

3. The Queen's life interprets to the world the far-reaching extent of a woman's influence in the home. These are days of woman's clubs, when woman's place in the larger interests of public life is being recognized as never before. I am not criticising the activities of our modern women in the various spheres of education, philanthropy and reform. But it cannot be too strongly emphasized that no woman can be an influence for good in public life who is faithless to her duties in the home. A woman who surrenders her sceptre of duty within her own family for a fleeting notoriety in the world, is divesting herself of an influence for good for which she can find no equivalent elsewhere. The source of Victoria's authority over her people lay in the purity and simplicity of her home life. Instead of degrading the morals of her court by licentious example, as other rulers had

done, she created before her court and before her people an ideal of family simplicity which has been a pattern for the world. Speaking as a Scotchman, may I say that nowhere was the beauty of the Queen's home life more delightfully seen than in the Highlands of Scotland, which she loved with a devotion equal to that of the most ardent child of the soil. Along the strath of Dee-side and beneath the shadow of Loch-na-Gar, in her highland home at Balmoral, she spent the happiest portion of her life, and especially during these later years it became more and more the home of her affections. There, doubtless, could she have chosen, she would have preferred to die, for it was there that she seemed to come closer to the hearts of her people. There is a familiar picture which one often sees in the form of an engraving in the farm-houses of Scotland. It represents the Queen sitting by the bedside of an old man, in a Highland cottage, he bedridden with age, she reading the Bible. The picture is typical of a common feature in the Queen's life in Scotland. It was in such acts of personal charity that she not only won the affection of her people as a woman who entered into their sorrows, but she deepened also the springs of her own spiritual life.

We might well learn that lesson of domestic simplicity in these days of social competition. In the selfish tyranny of modern pleasure, in the struggle to outdo each other in receptions and dinners and balls, in the vulgar advertising of such things in the daily newspaper, the modern society woman practically crucifies her home life, surrenders her home influence, and finds no time to visit the homes of the poor, and touch with hands of compassion the sobbing needs of common

life. It is in such personal acts, far more than in the dispensing of large sums of money to institutions of which perhaps we know practically nothing, that a woman's deepest influence will always rest.

Nor can we forget how the Queen was aided during the earlier years of her married life, in establishing habits of piety and simplicity in her home, by the presence of her husband, Albert the Good. The extent to which the Prince Consort deepened the character of the Queen, helped her to understand the necessities of her people, and taught her to sympathize with their sorrows will probably never be fully recognized. It is sufficient to remember that, with the early influences of a good training, Victoria enjoyed the companionship of a true husband.

Such, then, are some of the lessons which this life interprets to the world to-day, but especially to the womanhood of Britain and America. As citizens of the American republic, we can never forget the kindly and thoughtful interest which the Queen always felt in the well-being of this nation. Her sympathy, expressed again and yet again in our hours of great calamity, was prompted by a genuine and hearty appreciation of the kinship between America and the mother country. Especially ought we to remember that her influence with her statesmen, sometimes less wise than herself, was always to avoid anything like misunderstanding or rupture in the cordial relations between the two countries. No mistake could be greater than to suppose that Queen Victoria was a mere figure-head in the affairs of state. Every dispatch which bore her signature was carefully studied and its consequences weighed before she allowed it to pass from her

hands. On one memorable occasion at least (and others might be mentioned) it was her hand that revised a dispatch prepared by her foreign secretary and addressed to President Lincoln, so that what originally, from the secretary's pen, had read like a menace of war, became through her influence a message of peace. Who can estimate the awful possibilities of that might-have-been in the history of these two countries, but for the influence of Queen Victoria? How far these recent and terrible days of bloodshed in South Africa hastened her end, we cannot say, but that she used every effort to avert that war and to bring its carnage and desolation to an end, will some day be recorded as a matter of public history.

So I close as I began: Although citizens of a republic and owning allegiance to another flag, we pay with willing hearts to-day our tribute of appreciation to this gracious life. "A woman that feareth the Lord, she shall be praised." We may well thank God this morning for the gift of such a life in our day and generation,—beautiful in its simplicity, unspotted in its purity and unswerving in its devotion to high ideals. We dare to hope that while in one sense Victoria's death closes an epoch, in another sense the fuller recognition of what she was and what she did may open up an era of closer kinship between the mother land and this republic, and to that end we too can echo the Laureate's words:

"A people's voice, in full acclaim,
A people's voice, the proof and echo of all human fame,
Attest this much-loved ruler's claim,
All honour, honour, honour to her—
Undying honour to her name!"

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